

## **Class Participation Marks and Gender in the Humanities Seminar**

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### **Abstract:**

Within the Humanities, female students tend to receive lower class participation marks, despite being in the majority within the Humanities' student body. Research suggests a number of reasons for this disparity, often going back to early childhood socialization. This article explores different seminar activities that can be employed to combat this gender gap, concluding with a consideration of the efficacy of the World Café to encourage all students to participate in active learning and reap the benefits of class participation.

**Key Words:** Gender Gap, Class Participation, Active Learning, Seminar Format

Humanities teaching is broken into two distinct activities: lecturing and seminar tuition. A good lecture enables students to achieve the first two levels of the cognitive domain: remember and understand (Krathwohl's revision taxonomy, 2002). Seminars then enable students to take charge of their own learning processes, "going beyond the information given" (Bruner, 1966). It is in the seminar that learning becomes student-centred and collaborative.

Unlike many other disciplines, English Literature offers students very few facts. This can be disconcerting for students new to university, who are used to the revision practices engendered at A Levels. One of the first steps of humanities teaching, then, is helping students understand that knowing 'things' is only the beginning. The information provided in lectures is not enough; they must take that knowledge and consider how they can use it to think critically

about a work of literature. For instance, knowing a sonnet should be fourteen lines long does not help them to understand why a poet might choose to use this form or what effect is achieved by conforming to a conventional mode of poetry. The fact of the sonnet is only the beginning.

As R.S. Peters observed in his *Philosophy of Education* (1973), ‘to be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view’ (20). The most basic role of a humanities educator is to provide students with the core knowledge of the subject material; for instance, in Keats’s ‘On the Sonnet’, I can explain the numerous references to classical mythology (Andromeda, Midas, Apollo, etc). I can guide them through the process of *analysing* the effect of the references, *evaluating* how that effect might change based on their own unique perspectives (e.g. they have not had a ‘classical education’, so these stories are not familiar to them), and finally *creating* an original argument about Keats’ use of mythology. There is no substitute, however, for students working through the poem for themselves. ‘To instruct someone...is not a matter of getting him to commit results to the mind. Rather it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge’ (Bruner, 1966, 72). My role within the seminar classroom, then, is to facilitate student discussion and debate. Class discussion allows students to explain their ideas to their peers, seeking evidence within the text to support their views and being confronted with a variety of perspectives on a piece of literature. As a seminar leader, allowing them to talk through their ideas without micro-managing the discussion is key. By the end of the session I would hope that students didn’t just feel like they understood what the poem was ‘about’, but that they understood the process of literary analysis and the development of an argument and supporting evidence.

Researchers agree that class participation is an essential part of active learning (Provitera McGlynn, 2000, 16). Oral participation has been shown to ‘enhance cognition and generate a positive affective influence on learning’ (Russell and Cahill-O’Callaghan, 2014, 71). Active learning increases motivation and improves interpersonal and communication skills (Yaylaci and Beauvais, 2017, 559). The latter is particularly important in this economic climate. Russell and Cahill-O’Callaghan note that ‘communication skills’ were ranked as the most important graduate skill by potential employers (63). For students in the Humanities, written and oral communication are among their most important ‘transferable skills’. Therefore, one of the challenges of seminar tuition is ensuring that everyone speaks, and therefore reaps the benefits of social, active, and constructed learning—and this is often a gendered problem.

In 2014, the number of girls seeking a place at university in Britain was more than a third larger than that of boys (Kirkup, 2014) and in Europe, women account for 59% of undergraduate degrees across all subjects (Carter, 2017, 3). At university, women are more likely than their male counterparts to earn a good degree (Weale, 2016). Given these figures, we might assume that women’s needs were being met in the classroom. However, some classroom practices continue to disadvantage women.

In 2016, an external examiner for Keele’s American Studies programme noted that female students were underperforming in class participation marks. These marks (which account for 10-20% of many of Keele’s English and American Literatures, English, and English with Creative Writing module marks) reward attendance and contributions to classroom activities and

discussion. The majority of students studying literature at Keele are women (approximately 70%), yet in most cases they contribute less to class discussion than our male students. My own seminars reflect this divide. My current third-year module (which carries a 10% class participation mark) is 84% female, and yet the male students dominate open class discussion. Yaylaci and Beauvais (2017) define this as ‘internal exclusion’: ‘having little voice or influence in conversations—despite the formal presence of disempowered group members—because of their minority status or reduced social standing’ (560). Merely getting women into the classroom, ensuring gender parity, or even teaching in fields in which female students are in the majority, is not enough to ensure that women’s voices are given equal time to men’s within the classroom.

Researchers point to a number of reasons for the gender disparity in classroom speaking time. As James and Drakich (1993) suggest, ‘differences in behavior result primarily from differences in expectations and beliefs about oneself and others’ (286). Gendered behaviour stems from early childhood socialization into expected gender roles, which occurs both at home and in school. Morrisette, Jesme, and Hunter (2018) have published a recent study demonstrating that gendered biases and stereotypes are still prevalent in today’s pre-kindergarten (nursery) to grade 12 (A-Level) classrooms. This study demonstrates that ‘teachers and administrators held gender-biased beliefs, often unaware that their comments aligned with gendered stereotypes’ (302). The researchers equally pointed to the belief that girls ‘want to please’ and need ‘constant reassurance’ (304) as a stereotype that can ‘reinforce to girls that they need attention or permission to finish a task; educators may be implicitly reinforcing a message that girls cannot do this work on their own’ (305). This can lead to girls who are less willing to

engage in active learning in which they construct knowledge for themselves, preferring to wait for a teacher or tutor to give them the answer.

There are a number of possible ways in which these stereotypical gender roles internalized in early life may manifest in the university classroom. James and Drakich found that men were taught to use speech as a way to assert status and gain attention, while women had been socialized to use talking to ‘establish and maintain harmonious relationships’ (285). This means that women are far less likely to assert their opinion over others’. This raises what Angela Provitera McGlynn call the ‘ethics of participation’ (16). Russell and Cahill-O’Callaghan suggest that women ‘hold back from contributing’ because they ‘consider oneself in the context of others’ (63). Politeness as much as fear can hold women back. Women are also far more likely to wait to be acknowledged by the tutor, rather than speaking without being called upon (71). Powell and Caseau, too, point to the fact that boys are socialized to be verbally responsive and ‘command attention’, while girls ‘learn to use nonverbal behavior’ (78). Thus, women may be less likely to immediately answer a question without permission from an instructor, and may struggle to gain an instructor’s attention as readily as male students do.

So what is the solution? Gender biases must be addressed particularly in early education, but there are ways to increase class participation among women in higher education as well. Provitera McGlynn argues that educators must tailor classroom dynamics with gender in mind (16). One way to accomplish this is to change the goal of classroom discussion. A move away from ‘knowledge-checking’ (Russell and Cahill-O’Callaghan, 70) and ‘task-oriented activities’ (such as decision making or problem solving) (James and Drakich, 287) to collaborative learning

can help to address women's anxieties. One of the most common reasons given by women for not speaking in higher education classes is fear of getting the answer wrong (Russell and Cahill-O'Callaghan, 67; Yaylaci and Beauvais, 562; Carter, 11). Even in the Humanities, in which there is rarely a 'right answer', educators should avoid leading questions that seek a specific answer or line of inquiry.

Deborah Tannen (1992) has found that women speak more in situations coded as 'private' rather than 'public'. Thus, a number of researchers point to small group work as a means of redressing the gendered speech imbalance (Provitera McGlynn, 24; Carter, 19; Powell and Caseau, 80). Women are also more likely to speak in front of acquaintances rather than strangers (Yaylaci and Beauvais, 562), and thus educators can allow students to choose their own small groups. As women are less likely to answer questions immediately, 'think-write-pair-share' activities can ensure that men's voices don't dominate. A recent study of question asking behaviours has further found that the gender of the first person to ask a question in seminar 'sets the tone' for the rest of the session: 'our data [shows] no imbalance when the first question was asked by a woman and a large imbalance when the first question was asked by a man' (Carter, 21). Simply ensuring that woman speaks first (through asking students to write their responses down before answering) can ensure all voices are heard equally for the rest of the class.

In my own practice, I have had success with implementing a 'World Café' to address a classroom dynamic in which two very strong students dominated discussion, and several quieter students did not contribute at all. Juanita Brown (2005) describes a World Café as 'people in small groups spread[ing] their insight to larger groups, carrying the seed ideas for new

conversations, creative possibilities, and collective action. This systemic process is embodied in self-reinforcing, meaning-making networks that arise through the interactions that conversation makes possible' (18). Several students are asked to volunteer to serve as 'scribes' (recording groups' discussion), while the remaining students are broken into small groups. On the whole, quieter students are happy to serve as scribe, a task which on the surface appears to require less active participation in discussion. The scribes are each assigned a topic related to the week's text; groups circulate between the scribes, adding to the record of the previous group's discussion. Groups were given seven minutes to discuss the first topic, ten for the second, and twelve for the third. Scribes were then given five minutes to organize their thoughts before presenting the consensus of the class on each topic.

This structure is particularly well-suited to hold students' attention, even across a two-hour seminar. In a study of attention span, researchers determined that students' attention flagged in 'ever-shortening cycles', with lapses occurring between 4.5 and 9 minutes apart (Bunce, 2010, 1442). Though some researchers suggest that periods of inattention are essential to cognitive processing (Immordino-Yang, 2012), teachers obviously wish to hold attention during class. Bunce has demonstrated that active learning increases student attention span, and I believe the Café model is well suited to keeping students engaged as each cycle lasts for less than 15 minutes, with 'rest' in between in the form of physical activity. Research has demonstrated that physical activity in the classroom can improve 'attention, learning, and memory' (Fedewa, 2018, 153), with Sara Parker arguing that active learning is not truly *active* until it includes physical movement. She argues that incorporating physical activity even in university classes 'can enhance student focus and reinvigorate student attention by taking advantage of the cognitive

benefits of movement' (Parker, 2018, 1). This allows students to remain on task for longer than would be possible in traditional open discussion.

The Café format has further benefits, in that it allows instructors to direct discussion, often with assessment in mind, without micromanaging. Brown emphasizes the need to 'set the context' by clarifying 'the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold' (40).

Suggesting 'possible outcomes or success criteria' (52) from the discussion helps students to understand the relationship between the activity and the module's intended learning outcomes, and can be used to establish the relationship between the given Café topics and upcoming assessment. In addition to suggesting possible outcomes, asking the right questions is key to a successful Café. Brown encourages Café hosts to 'explore questions that matter' (40), and she notes that 'more open questions encourage a more thoughtful response that opens the door to further exploration and positive change' (91). In my first Café, I strove to avoiding leading questions and thus assigned broad topics (e.g. consumer culture). However, the structure of the World Café challenges hosts to provide provocative questions which generate lively engagement. Formatting topics as questions helps to provoke more immediate responses. The more provocative a question, the more likely it is to be met with strong opinions from the class (e.g. Does Emma Bovary's materialism mean that she "gets what she deserves" at the end of the novel?) The directed nature of the discussion means that ILOs can be met while students still lead the conversation.

Discussion during each segment of the Café has always been lively and directed in my seminars, with even the quietest students contributing to the construction of knowledge. As



Brown insists, ‘conversation *is* action’ (38). Asking the scribes to present on the groups’ discussion allows students who are anxious about saying the wrong thing to feel comfortable, because they are reporting on the ideas of others. Nevertheless, the role of the scribe helps to develop key academic skills, including public speaking and the ability to synthesize information.

It is, in some ways, disheartening to find a gender gap in class participation in the Humanities, which is already structured around knowledge construction and collaborative learning in small-group settings. Yet there are clear ways for educators to begin to address the problem within every seminar or tutorial, ensuring that all voices are heard and that all students have the opportunity to develop their communication skills and benefit from class participation marks.

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